

Extraordinary Women:  
A Look into the Lives of Louisa May Alcott,  
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sylvia Plath  
and Zora Neale Hurston

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Laurie Lindberg", is written over a horizontal line.

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### Abstract

This discussion of the experiences and challenges of female writers focuses on four authors: Louisa May Alcott, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sylvia Plath, and Zora Neale Hurston. This study of the lives of these four women attempts to reveal the personal difficulties each woman encountered and the struggles battled by all women who pursued careers in writing.

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**“Literature cannot be the business of a woman and ought not to be.”**

--Robert Southey in a letter to Charlotte Bronte (Russ 11).

Despite Southey's opinion, an opinion many have shared over the years, literature can indeed be the business of women. It has been, it is now, and it will continue to be.

Unfortunately, a woman's involvement in that business has always come at a high price.

Southey's statement is not simply an ignorant, chauvinistic remark about women's supposed inferiority. His comment is reflective of a once-prevalent social attitude and hints at the numerous obstacles women writers had to face. Certainly, women were legally free to write. No law existed forbidding women from writing. What stopped them? Joanna Russ makes a significant point in her book *How To Suppress Women's Writing*: “First of all, it's important to realize that the absence of formal prohibitions against committing art does not preclude the presence of powerful, informal ones” (6).

A woman who chose to write chose to step beyond the boundaries of her socially-defined role. Literature, credible literature at least, was a man's field. The desire to be a writer was, in effect, the desire to be a man.

According to Freud, “The wish to get the longed for penis . . . may contribute to the motives that drive a mature woman to analysis, and what she may reasonably expect from analysis--a capacity, for instance, to carry on an intellectual profession--may often be recognized as a sublimated modification of this repressed wish” (Russ 35). Scholarly work such as writing was considered unwomanly, and a woman being unwomanly was considered scandalous. If they were not manly, women writers were immoral. As Russ states in *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, virtuous women could not know enough about life to write well, and those who knew

enough about life to write well could not be virtuous (25). The roles of gentlewoman and writer were mutually exclusive. What if a woman wrote well? Successful writing was more evidence of deficient femininity or of impropriety. "Intellectual women . . . have a large proportion of maleness in their makeup," said Otto Weininger (35). Ladies did not become writers. Even the women knew what the decision to write meant. Sylvia Plath said, "A woman has to sacrifice all claims to femininity and family to be a writer" (37).

Being brave enough to write despite the social stigma meant that a female writer had overcome only one of many obstacles in her path. Writing requires time, ink, paper, freedom from distractions, and money. One could not easily be both mother and writer, wife and writer, or worker and writer. All of the roles traditionally assigned to women conflicted with the pursuance of the business of writing.

Still, women wrote. The magnitude of the accomplishments of those who did write cannot be realized simply by reading their works. Genuine appreciation of their writing must be accompanied by the examination of their lives. While each woman writer's life engaged her in unique experiences, similarities did exist, and much can be learned about female writers as a group by studying the lives of a few. I have chosen to examine the lives of two well-known and two lesser-known female writers. One is best known for her juvenile literature, one for her poetry, one for her short story on madness (and other works), and one for capturing the essence of her cultural heritage on paper. By peering into the lives of Louisa May Alcott, Sylvia Plath, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Zora Neale Hurston, we see the challenges presented to all women who dared to write. An awareness of what these authors have overcome leads to a greater appreciation of both the authors and their works.

**“Mr. F[ields] did say, ‘Stick to your teaching; you can’t write.’  
Being wilful, I said, ‘I won’t teach; and I can write, and I’ll prove it.’”**

The quotation above is from a May 1862 journal entry by Louisa May Alcott (Myerson, Shealy, and Stern 109). Her strong will and fierce determination were crucial ingredients in the success of Louisa May Alcott as a writer. Louisa May Alcott was no stranger to hardship. She grew up in poverty and did not know financial security until late in life.

Born on November 29, 1832, in Germantown, Pennsylvania, Louisa was the daughter of the famous philosopher, Bronson Alcott, and Abigail May (Delamar 6). Alcott never provided his family with a steady income or security. He often spent his time teaching, lecturing and traveling, none of which proved profitable. His Temple school failed as did the Fruitlands commune, and his lecturing tour in the western U. S. profited him a single dollar (Myerson, Shealy and Stern 71). Gloria Delamar tells us that much of Louisa’s life was patterned to suit her father’s theories and ideals. Bronson believed that learning could be fun and that children learned the “refinement of the soul” by exposure to beautiful things (8). For example, when Louisa was four years of age, her father began to teach Louisa at home by demonstrating the letters of the alphabet with his body (Delamar 8). Also, her parents required her to keep a journal from an early age and greatly encouraged her in her literary attempts (Kersey 5). At age eight, she wrote her first poem, and her mother complimented her by saying, “Louisa, you could grow up to be a second Shakespeare if you keep writing” (Delamar 14).

Louisa and her mother were always close. Marmee’s sense of family was strong and perhaps the only thing that kept the Alcott family surviving in her husband’s absences. After Bronson’s schools failed, according to Delamar, the Alcotts were deeply in debt (7). The family

was hungry, and their clothes were threadbare (9). Ralph Waldo Emerson sent Bronson, whose educational ideas were popular in England, on a trip to Europe; when he returned, he brought several people with him, including Mr. Charles Lane and his son, William (15). This group later comprised the Fruitlands commune, and Mr. Lane became the Alcott girls' tutor.

In 1843, the Alcotts moved to the Fruitlands, where Bronson and his disciple Charles Lane began a commune (18). The experiment failed. In 1844, the family left the Fruitlands for their new home in Still River, Brick-Ends (24). After Mrs. Alcott's father died and left her a small sum of money, the Alcotts moved into their first owned home, the Concord house, where their neighbors included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne (27). The poverty of her family began to weigh heavily on Louisa's mind, and she resolved to do something to aid her family.

In 1851, Louisa began teaching and selling her poems and stories for small sums, which increased with her increasing popularity (Myerson, Shealy, and Stern xviii). She even contemplated selling her hair, but the family would not hear of it (Delamar 36). In the summers when schools were not in session, Louisa took jobs sewing or washing clothes (Delamar 37). Despite her time-consuming jobs, she wrote as often as she could and expressed displeasure when kept from writing (Myerson, Shealy and Stern 78). In 1854, her first book, *Flower Fables*, a collection of stories she had written for Emerson's daughter, was published and earned her thirty-two dollars (Myerson, Shealy, and Stern 73).

In 1856, Louisa decided to go to Boston to be on her own for the first time, Delamar tells us (42). She tutored to supplement the income from her writing career and did sewing for her landlady in exchange for lower rent (43). She enjoyed life in Boston, and, while on a visit home,

she said, "I have done what I planned, --supported myself, written eight stories, taught four months, earned a hundred dollars, and sent money home" (46).

In 1862, the country was at war with itself, and Louisa served her country as a nurse (Myerson, Shealy, and Stern 110). It was difficult, filthy, heartbreaking work, but Delamar remarks that she did it well and was a favorite among the patients (61). However, after only three weeks of work, she became very ill, and her father was summoned to escort her home (64). This experience would later be the inspiration for her work *Hospital Sketches*.

*Hospital Sketches* was a success, which provided Louisa with publishing opportunities (Keyser 8). She began making money writing the "blood and thunder" tales that were popular in gazette publications. For these stories, she used the pen name A. M. Barnard (Keyser 9). Louisa also made money by writing a column of advice for young women for *The New York Ledger* and by editing a children's magazine, *Merry's Museum* (Delamar 80, 81). She evidently enjoyed writing for young people.

Louisa was needed at home in Concord in the spring of 1868, and she was asked to write a book for girls in May of the same year (Delamar 83). For years, Delamar states, she had played with the idea of writing a story about her family, and she had previously written editorials and stories based on herself and her sisters (83). Her book would be about the lives of four sisters. The title of the book would become *Little Women*, which came from Bronson Alcott's term for his four daughters (85). After only six weeks, the first part of *Little Women* (originally published in two parts) was complete (Myerson, Shealy, and Stern 166). With the terrific success of *Little Women*, Louisa abandoned sensational story-writing and devoted herself to writing *Little Women's* successors (Keyser 11).



*Little Women*, her most famous work and the one that she considered her masterpiece, is a largely autobiographical work. Many of the characters were based upon family members and friends. The lead character, Josephine March, was based upon herself, and Jo's three sisters, Meg, Beth and Amy, were based upon Louisa's own siblings, Anna, Elizabeth, and May. Also, Jo's mother, Marmee, was based upon Louisa's mother, Abigail May Alcott. Much of the content of *Little Women* stemmed from actual events in the lives of the members of the Alcott family. Louisa wrote about her life experiences in her other works as well. Through Jo's struggles as a writer, readers are given a glimpse into the challenges Louisa herself faced. Several events in *Little Women* were taken from actual events in Louisa's life. The reader learns early in *Little Women* that Jo yearns to become a writer as Louisa did. In the chapter entitled "Castles in the Air," Jo describes her own "castle." Jo says,

I'd have a stable full of Arabian steeds, rooms piled with books, and I'd write out of a magic inkstand, so that my works should be as famous as Laurie's music. I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle--something heroic or wonderful, that won't be forgotten after I'm dead. I don't know what, but I'm on the watch for it, and mean to astonish you all, someday. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous: that would suit me, so that is *my* favorite dream.

(Alcott 185)

Louisa did exactly that, and her works have still not been forgotten.

Another example involved the first story of Louisa's ever published, "The Rival Painters." It was printed on the front page of the *Olive Branch Magazine* on May 8, 1852, and she received \$5 for it (Delamar 36). In the chapter of *Little Women* entitled "Secrets," Jo reads

her sisters a story called “The Rival Painters” and hears their opinions of it before revealing that she is the author. This is also the first story that Jo March has published. Louisa later won a \$100 prize for her story “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” in a contest for *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (Delamar 65). In the “Literary Lessons” chapter of *Little Women*, Jo discovered the contest, submitted a manuscript, waited six weeks and received a letter and a check for \$100. Winning the contest encouraged Louisa and Jo in their writing, and they realized that they could earn money from their stories. Louisa noted the stories she sold and the amounts she received for them in her journal. With time, she sold an increasing number of stories per year for increasing amounts of money. In *Little Women*, Jo uses her prize money to send her mother and sister Beth on a vacation. After she sent them off, she wrote more stories,

bent on earning more of those delightful checks. She did earn several that year, and began to feel herself a power in the house; for by the magic of a pen, her ‘rubbish’ turned into comforts for them all. ‘The Duke’s Daughter’ paid the butcher’s bill, ‘A Phantom Hand’ put down a new carpet, and the ‘Curse of the Coventrys’ proved the blessing of the Marches in the way of groceries and gowns. (Alcott 350)

Louisa shared more than a love for writing with her character Josephine. The March family that Louisa invented had to deal with the same poverty that the Alcotts endured. Poverty is an issue widely addressed in *Little Women*. The opening lines of the book describe the March family’s situation: “‘Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,’ grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.” Meg continued with, “It’s so dreadful to be poor!” (Alcott 3). The entire work is based upon the family and its struggle with poverty. Despite their poverty, neither the Alcotts nor the

Marches pitied themselves, but made the best of their situations and were even generous with what little they had.

Thanks to *Little Women*, Louisa now had more with which to be generous. The novel was a huge success. Delamar quotes Louisa as saying,

After toiling so many years along the uphill road, always a hard one to women writers, --it is peculiarly grateful to me to find the way going easier at last, with pleasant little surprises blossoming on either side, and the rough places made smooth by the courtesy and kindness of these who have proved themselves friends as well as publishers. (94)

Yet she never forgot her poverty and continued writing to ensure her security. Delamar reports that editors wanted more stories, but after she submitted some of her old ones, she decided she needed to rest because her health was poor (97). She went to Europe on a vacation with her sister May, and celebrated her thirty-eighth birthday in Rome (100).

Because of her extended vacation, rumors flew about that Louisa had died. Delamar explains what happened then. Her publisher sent her a note asking her if she were dead (100). After this, she wrote *Little Men* and sent it to him (101). Louisa decided to return home to Concord, but paid for her sister, May, to stay another year (102). She later moved back to Boston and wrote *Eight Cousins*, which several publishers fought over (110). Louisa then took another brief vacation from writing and participated in the women's suffrage movement (112). Upon the end of this break, she wrote the sequel to *Eight Cousins*, *Rose in Bloom* (115). She sent May to Europe for another year, and gave Anna \$2500 to put toward the purchase of a house (115). Louisa provided for her family the way her father never had.

Marmee's health was failing by 1877, Delamar reports, and Louisa nursed her mother while working on a collection of stories. Then, Louisa became seriously ill herself, but she was determined to live as long as her mother was alive. On November 25, 1877, Mrs. Alcott died. She was buried beside Elizabeth (117). Both Louisa and her father were depressed for several weeks after Mrs. Alcott's death. After she and her father visited her mother's grave a year later, Louisa felt it was time to start writing again (Delamar 120). Her health was still poor, so Louisa was careful not to overwork herself this time.

According to Delamar, more tragedy was in store for Louisa. Her sister May gave birth to a daughter on November 8, 1879, and died of complications in childbirth several weeks later (122). May's dying wish was that Louisa raise the child, which May had named Louisa (122, 125). While Louisa knew this would mean less time for writing, she felt hopeful at the idea of raising a child (124). She balanced writing and motherhood quite well. Writing books simply took her longer now. Her last novel, *Jo's Boys*, took several years to write, and was finally published in 1886 (132).

Her father Bronson had not been the same since he suffered a paralytic stroke in 1882 (Delamar 127). By 1888, Louisa knew he would die soon. On one visit to him, she asked what he was thinking, and he pointed upward and replied, "Up there; come with me." Louisa said, "I wish I could" (Delamar 139).

In Delamar's account of her final days, Delamar describes how Louisa fell ill a short time after this visit. She suffered from fever and chills, and her doctor said she had either meningitis or apoplexy. She was dying. Her father died on March 4, 1888, but the family did not tell Louisa. Two days later, on March 6, 1888, Louisa died in her sleep (139).

Her life was never easy, but her fierce determination and strength of will helped Louisa May Alcott fulfill her dreams. She achieved financial security, independence, fame, and the love and admiration of millions of readers worldwide.

**“All pain is personal. It is between You and the Thing that Hurts. You may not be able to move the Thing--but you are movable.”**

The above quotation is by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and appeared in a magazine called *The Forerunner*, which she edited (Lane xxvi). This quotation sums up Gilman's philosophy on life and describes how she dealt with life's struggles up to the day she died at her own hands.

Charlotte Anna Perkins was born in Hartford, Connecticut on July 3, 1860 (Allen 31). She was raised by her mother, Mary Fitch. Her father was Frederick Beecher Perkins, grandson of noted theologian Lyman Beecher, and the nephew of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher. Perkins left his wife and children soon after Charlotte's birth and provided little support after he left (Allen 32). His departure was always a painful mystery to Charlotte. The family lived in isolation and poverty, and they moved from place to place frequently. Mary Fitch's failed marriage embittered her. She denied affection to her children so that they might learn to live without it and not suffer later if love were removed from them (Lane xxxvii). Charlotte later said, “My mother, devoted soul that she was, hurt me more than anyone else ever did” (Lane xxxv).

In her youth, Charlotte studied art at Rhode Island School of Design and later earned a living designing greeting cards, teaching art, and tutoring children (Lane x). When she was twenty-four, she married an attractive local artist, Charles Walter Stetson, with whom she had her daughter, Katherine Beecher (Allen 38). From the beginning of her marriage, Charlotte suffered from depression, which worsened after giving birth. At the suggestion of her husband, she saw S. Weir Mitchell, a neurologist famous for his “rest cure” that required extended bed rest, isolation, and inactivity (Lane x). He forbade her to write or paint ever again and permitted her

to read only two hours a day. From a modern perspective, the “rest cure” is clearly ridiculous medical advice. Even then Charlotte knew it was not helping her. In her article entitled “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” Charlotte said, “I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over” (Lane 20). She fled to the house of Grace Ellery Channing, her best friend, in Pasadena, California (Allen 40). She and Walter later divorced; he then married Grace Channing, and the three of them raised Katherine (Lane xi).

In her public writing, Charlotte blamed her inability to function as wife and mother for the failure of the marriage, but, in truth, Walter’s conservatism conflicted with her restless spirit (Lane xi). He felt she was “too affectionately expressive,” as she recorded in her journal (Lane xi).

While she lived in California, she supported herself, her mother, and her daughter by running a boardinghouse, and in this period, she launched her career (Lane xii). “The Yellow Wallpaper” appeared in 1892, and other works followed (Allen 44). Ann Lane tells us that as a result of her growing interest in social movements of the West Coast, she began earning a living lecturing and was absent from home frequently. Katherine went to live with her father and stepmother. The press then labeled Charlotte as an “unnatural mother” and accused her of abandoning her child (xii). This scandal disturbed her greatly, and she left home for a five-year lecturing tour. (She later wrote a story called “The Unnatural Mother” that dealt with such an accusation.) While touring, she wrote her most famous book, *Women and Economics* (xii).

Lane continues the story of Charlotte’s life with an account of her second marriage. In the spring of 1900, Charlotte married her first cousin, George Houghton Gilman, after a long

courtship (xiii). He did not stifle her as her first husband had; she was completely honest with George. According to Polly Allen, they lived happily for thirty years (45). Charlotte's last few years were sad, however. In 1932, she learned of her own inoperable cancer, and in 1934, George died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage (54). After his death, she returned to Pasadena, where she lived with Katherine and fellow widow Grace Channing Stetson. On August 17, 1935, Charlotte committed suicide, choosing not to succumb to the cancer but to end her life herself by inhaling chloroform (Allen 54).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a woman of ideas, and she publicized her ideas through her writing and lecturing. In "The Yellow Wallpaper" Gilman semi-autobiographically described in vivid detail slipping into a life of insanity. She said that she wrote it to prevent others from the adverse effects of the "rest cure" (Lane 20). She fought against the social constraints that repressed women and kept them from achieving equality. However, according to Lane, she did not consider herself a feminist. She felt the world was "masculinist," and she fought for a humanized concept (xiv). Allen believes that what she fought hardest against was the sexual division of labor (60). In 1930, she wrote, "We have so mixed motherhood with house-service that we find it difficult to dissociate them" (61). She was a socialist, Lane points out, and felt everyone should do the work for which he or she was best suited (xv). She did not think the home should be a place of work for either gender. Her fiction often deals with the problems women share and offers remedies to the problems (xvii). She fought against the traditions and confines of society that trapped women. In her work, she deals with the tensions between career and family (xxi). She always felt people had choices; she said, "our possibilities for change are limitless, if we want them"(xxii).



Charlotte Perkins Gilman's childhood was void of love and affection. Her mother was bitter, her father was absent, and her family was poor. Marriage brought no relief. Her first husband wanted to suppress her restless spirit. She suffered from depression and had to care for her child. Her doctor said she should never write again. Society frowned upon her divorce from him and the way she raised her daughter. Life was never easy. She traded one struggle for another throughout her lifetime. Still, she wrote.

**“I write only because  
There is a voice within me  
That will not be still.”**

At the age of sixteen, Sylvia Plath wrote a poem entitled “You Ask Me Why I Spend My Life Writing,” which ended with those three lines (Plath 34). Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932, to Otto and Aurelia Schober Plath in Boston’s Robinson Memorial Hospital. Plath’s biographer, Diane Wagner-Martin, tells us that Sylvia was the couple’s first child, but she would be followed by a second child three years later. This child was a boy whom they named Warren. Otto and Aurelia were loving and well-educated parents (15). Her father was a professor of entomology at Boston University, and his top priority was furthering his career (9). Her mother Aurelia was teaching German and English at Brookline High School and studying for her M.A. degree when she met Otto. After their marriage, she resigned her teaching position (19). She balanced motherhood with helping her husband with his research and writing (20).

In the mid-1930's, Otto began suffering from an undiagnosed illness, but he refused to see a doctor because he suspected it was cancer. Wagner-Martin explains that a friend of his had died of lung cancer, and Otto did not want to go through difficult medical treatments like his friend had (23). Aurelia took on more work, and began keeping his class notes up to date, grading papers, finding bibliography for his research, and correcting graduate theses. Otto withdrew from the family almost completely and lived in his study (25).

In 1940, Otto injured a toe, and gangrene set in. They finally called a doctor, and he diagnosed Otto with diabetes mellitus, a treatable ailment. However, by this time, the disease was too far advanced to save Otto. He died on November 5, 1940 (Wagner-Martin 28). Sylvia

was eight years old. His death affected Sylvia deeply, although she exhibited little grief and insisted upon attending school the same day (28). In *The Bell Jar*, she wrote as Esther that she was happiest before she was nine (32).

Otto's death left the family in a poor financial position, and Aurelia immediately returned to teaching for \$25 a week, according to Wagner-Martin. Sylvia felt some responsibility for the financial worries, and she feared losing her mother, whose duodenal ulcer worsened after Otto's death (29). The Schobers moved in with the Plaths, and Mrs. Schober became particularly influential (31). She was at home all day with the children, she was the only licensed driver in the home, and she controlled the finances. Otto's death led to the change from a patriarchal home to a matriarchal one (32).

More change followed when Aurelia was offered a position at Boston University, and the family moved to Wellesley (32). Soon after arriving in Wellesley, Aurelia suffered a gastric hemorrhage and was hospitalized three weeks. Sylvia was very scared at this time and wrote letters to her mother telling her how well behaved she was being (33). Despite all the disruptions in her life, Sylvia maintained her straight A's at Wellesley and even wrote forty extra book reports in fifth grade (35). Life eventually became less chaotic. Aurelia worked at Boston University for the next twenty-nine years, and she took her children to gatherings with her coworkers, took her children to the library often, purchased books for them as often as she could with money from their "book fund," and took her children to plays and concerts (36, 37).

In junior high, Sylvia wrote prolifically--diary entries, fiction, and poetry. Her first publications were in a junior high magazine called *The Phillipian* (38). Ninth grade brought continued academic success, although her social life did not flourish. However, she developed

one close friendship that year with Phil McCurdy, a boy who came home with her brother Warren one day after school (40).

Wagner-Martin describes Sylvia's high school years as difficult. Sylvia wanted to date as often and as many boys as possible, but her intelligence intimidated the boys who knew her. Also, Wellesley was a wealthy suburb, and the Plath's were far from wealthy (42). Sylvia tried to create a new, more fun-loving personality for herself, using the nickname Sherry, but she could not suppress her academic ambitions and competitiveness (43). Because of her family's financial situation, she often felt like an outsider in her privileged high school, and she realized that she needed scholarships for a good education (46). She submitted many writings to publications to earn extra income, and, while she accumulated nearly seventy rejection slips by her senior year, she had acceptances from *Seventeen*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Boston Globe*. In her senior year, she earned \$63.50 from her publications (47).

Sylvia excelled in high school, but not effortlessly. Social acceptance began to come in her junior year with the invitation to join a sorority and requests for dates (48). In her senior year, she decided to attend Smith College after winning a \$450 scholarship from a local Smith Club and an \$850 scholarship from Olive Higgins Prouty, a well-known author (53). (In *The Bell Jar*, Prouty is the model for the character of Philomena Guinea.) That year, Sylvia also won the top prize in *The Atlantic Monthly* Scholastic contest for fiction and first prize in the *Boston Globe* contest (53).

Life at Smith was not easy, according to her biographer, though Sylvia enjoyed being "a Smith girl" (61). She felt she had to study at every free moment. She felt anxiety about both her grades and her nonexistent social life. However, she did well at Smith and dated, too. Still, she

began to realize that what she wanted for herself was different from what everyone else seemed to think was right for her (72). In her journal she wrote, "Being born a woman is my awful tragedy" (74). She sought out role models among the faculty at Smith. Many professors were women, but Sylvia was looking specifically for female professors with husbands and children.

Sylvia's second year at Smith was happier and more stable (80). She experienced continued success with the publication of her fiction and poetry (78). She was also invited into Smith's arts honorary and was asked to be on the board of *Smith Review*, the campus literary magazine (Wagner-Martin 79).

Her junior year at Smith was another difficult one, reports Wagner-Martin. Several women did not return to school because of marriage or work. Also, several women on campus attempted suicide, had abortions, made hasty marriages, or mysteriously left campus (87). Sylvia was forced to live in a different house due to a tuition increase. In that house, she worked in exchange for part of the cost of room and board (86). A doctor diagnosed her longtime friend/boyfriend Dick Norton (*The Bell Jar*'s "Buddy Willard") with TB, and in his prescribed rest he began reading and writing seriously (88). Sylvia was jealous of his freedom to write. She first recorded thoughts of suicide in this year, and she suffered from insomnia (88, 91). A man with whom she had long corresponded urged her to seek counseling whatever the cost. She did not (91).

That Christmas break, Sylvia was expected to spend her holidays with Dick. She broke her leg skiing, an event Wagner-Martin tells us she recreated in *The Bell Jar* (92). This was a huge burden to the girl who had to get around an icy, snowy campus. Her cast came off in the spring, and she began dating a man she considered marrying (94). However, both she and the

man dated other people, and their relationship ended (94). The next major event in her life occurred when she was chosen for the *Mademoiselle* College Board. This experience is recalled in the first part of *The Bell Jar*. She would live in New York for the summer and work on the staff of the magazine (96). This was exciting, but during that summer she worked long hours under a difficult supervisor, suffered from food poisoning, and was nearly raped. On her last night there, she threw many of her clothes out the window, disgusted with the world of fashion (100).

Wagner-Martin describes the next period of Plath's life as a difficult one. Upon returning home, Sylvia discovered that she had not been accepted into a Harvard summer fiction course. She fell into a depression, and she did little but sleep (101). Her mother tried to have her learn shorthand and work as a nurse, but neither plan lasted long (102). Sylvia went from sleeping too much to insomnia, and she was apprehensive about her upcoming senior year at Smith (102). Aurelia took her to a doctor who recommended shock treatments, which were very painful (103). After a few weeks, Sylvia crawled into a space under the first-floor bedroom of the Plath home and attempted suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. She lost consciousness for two days, with no one aware of her situation (104). Sylvia's "disappearance" received national news coverage (105). Warren found her under the house two days after her suicide attempt, and an ambulance took her to the hospital (105). Similar events also happen to Plath's lead character in *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood.

Olive Higgins Prouty provided for Sylvia again, assuming the cost and control of Sylvia's treatment, Wagner-Martin tells us (106). Sylvia went to the locked psychiatric wing of Massachusetts General Hospital and then to McLean Hospital in Belmont (107). Ruth Beuscher,

a young psychiatrist, took over her treatment. Ruth (*The Bell Jar*'s Dr. Nolan) was crucial to Sylvia's recovery (108). She taught Sylvia to rely on herself and to set more reasonable goals for herself. Also, Sylvia decided that sexual freedom would help with her recovery, and she took lovers. She returned to Smith in the spring of 1954, and she called her recovery her rebirth (110).

After her recovery, Sylvia was again the model student, an "academic star" (Wagner-Martin 112). She also had a busy social life and was involved in many extracurricular activities. She added a relationship to her already busy life when she met a rebellious Yale student, Richard Sassoon (114). For several years they spent their weekends together. The summer after her recovery, Sassoon went abroad, and Sylvia began a sexual relationship with a physics professor, while maintaining an existing relationship with Gordon Lameyer. As in *The Bell Jar*, her relationship with the physics professor led to a trip to the hospital as a result of his sexually assaulting her (116).

In her senior year, she received a \$1250 scholarship at Smith, and she concentrated on finishing her honors thesis on Dostoevsky's use of the double in his fiction, according to her biographer. She continued her relationships with both Lameyer and Sassoon (117). She won several major awards before graduation at Smith, the most important of them the Fulbright fellowship to Newnham College at Cambridge University in England (119).

Sylvia loved Cambridge, and by October she was settled in. She was far away from home and her mother, but she could not entirely reject the social expectations imprinted upon her. In late 1955, she wrote to her mother that she would not return to the United States until she had married. Men were plentiful at Cambridge, and Sylvia dated frequently (124).

Another bout with depression occurred by mid-February of 1956 in the midst of a bitterly

cold winter and after she had battled the flu and many colds. Sylvia recognized her symptoms, Wagner-Martin tells us, and went to a psychiatrist (128-129). She felt her depression was partly due to still being single at her age. She wrote in her journal of not yet finding the love of her life, and that same afternoon bought a copy of the new literary magazine, *St. Botolph's Review* (130). Several hours later, she returned to the place she had purchased it and asked where she could meet Ted Hughes, whose poems impressed her (130). Her frustration with single life also must have been a factor in her decision to introduce herself to Hughes.

That night she attended the *St. Botolph's* celebration and met him (130). Their first kisses that night proved to be memorable. She bit his cheek and drew blood, and he ripped off her headband and silver earrings (130). She did not see him again until the night before she was to leave for vacation (131). They spent the night at Ted's flat, quoting poetry, and making love (131). After she returned from her vacation, the two were inseparable (131). She described him in her letters as "the only man in the world who is my match" and as a "breaker of things and people" (133). They were married in a secret ceremony on June 16, 1956, in the Church of St. George the Martyr. The marriage was secret because Sylvia feared losing her scholarship if the marriage became public (134). After the marriage, the couple went to Spain, which Sylvia loved. However, she resented having to do the shopping, housekeeping, and cooking. The marriage was not all she thought it would be. In her July journal entry she wrote, "The world has grown crooked and sour as a lemon over night" (135).

Back in England, the couple's financial problems put a strain on the marriage, but Sylvia and Ted could not stand being apart. Sylvia finally told her tutor Irene Morris that she had married, and Morris spoke on Sylvia's behalf to the college authorities and the Fulbright



committee. They agreed to let Sylvia complete her year (139). Ted took a teaching job while Sylvia attended school, shopped, cooked, kept house, typed Ted's manuscripts, and studied (140). Despite these pressures, she and Ted were in love, and the marriage was a source of satisfaction and happiness for her (141).

After the completion of the year at Cambridge, Wagner-Martin tells, Sylvia received a job offer at Smith, and she and Ted went to America. Ted's poetry manuscript *The Hawk in the Rain* won a prize in New York and publication by Harper's (142). The summer homecoming was joyous for Sylvia.

The joy did not last, however. To her horror, she missed her period and became convinced she was pregnant that summer, which would have meant she could not teach at Smith. However, these fears diminished when she was tested for pregnancy and discovered she was not pregnant (144).

Sylvia began teaching at Smith in the fall. She felt inadequate as a teacher because she was inexperienced and had not published books, but she enthralled her students, according to Wagner-Martin (147). Teaching kept her busy, especially the grading of papers. She also graded another teacher's papers for extra money, performed the household duties and the cooking. She had little time to write, and resented Ted for having the time to do so (149). While recovering from a two-week bout of the flu, she realized she could not teach another year at Smith; she was fatigued, unhappy, and could not write (149).

Nothing in Plath's life improved, Wagner-Martin reports. During the spring term, she and Ted argued more and more. While she was a struggling teacher, Ted was free to write, given the luxury of free time and financial support provided by Sylvia. Sylvia was overworked and

became ill again with depression and fevers. She and Ted moved to Boston so that they could be more free to write, but Sylvia was blocked. The plan had been for Ted to take a full-time job, but he felt they could support themselves with their writing (153). Sylvia chose to take on a part-time job as an office clerk and receptionist in the psychiatric clinic of Massachusetts General Hospital. She did not keep that job long, however (154).

Back in the apartment, she seemed to become ill whenever she and Ted were both writing (154). She knew she needed to seek therapy again, and she secretly met with Dr. Beuscher (155). She found the therapy successful in helping her come to terms with her sense of failing the mother figures in her life and with her father's death (155).

Wagner-Martin observes that by 1959, her marriage to Ted had become less a partnership and more a traditional marriage with Ted as a breadwinner and her main priority being a good wife to Ted (156). She continued her sessions with Dr. Beuscher, and she took a job as a departmental secretary at Harvard (157). She also took a poetry workshop taught by Robert Lowell, in which she met Anne Sexton. Sylvia and Anne had similar life experiences and developed a friendship quickly. Sylvia was back at her writing, and several works were published (158).

It was in 1959, we learn from Wagner-Martin, that Sylvia and Ted decided to move back to England after spending the fall at Yaddo, an artists' and writers' colony in New York (160). She became pregnant, but this time she was pleased with the news. At Yaddo, she did not have to shop, cook or clean. She and Ted shared a bedroom but worked in separate studios. She loved the place and grew as a poet there. She celebrated her twenty-seventh birthday there (165).

On January 2, 1960, she and Ted arrived in London. Good news came on February 10,

when William Heinemann Ltd. wanted to publish a book of Sylvia's poetry, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (170). To celebrate, Ted bought her the three-volume set of D. H. Lawrence's *Collected Poems* (170).

Sylvia's last month of pregnancy tired her, and the physical discomfort made her irritable (173). The baby finally arrived on April 1, 1960, the day after Ted won the Somerset Maugham Award for *The Hawk in the Rain* (174). The child was a girl, and they named her Frieda Rebecca (174). Sylvia was excited about the child, but was extremely tired because of the new duties imposed upon her. Being a wife and mother took up more and more of her time. With Ted's increasing success, she became identified more as Sylvia Hughes, Ted's wife, and not as the poet Sylvia Plath (176).

In 1961, Sylvia suffered a miscarriage and appendicitis (182). After returning home from her hospital stay, she received word that *The Colossus* had been bought for American publication (184). This excited her, and she worked "fiendishly" on her novel, *The Bell Jar* (185). What she wrote was largely autobiographical, but she wanted it also to speak for the lives of all women struggling with conflicting social expectations (185). She turned to *The Catcher in the Rye* for a model and used events from her life to mold Esther's story (187).

Wagner-Martin reports that Sylvia became pregnant again, and she and Ted searched for a home to buy (191). They moved to Devon. She wrote many poems at this time, and she received a Saxton grant of \$2000 (197). Ted was also earning money from his writing. Life at Devon was pleasant. On January 17, 1962, their second child, Nicholas Farrar, was born. The period after his birth was much like the period after Frieda's, but this time Sylvia knew what to expect (198).

After the next spring, Sylvia became aware of a gulf growing between her and Ted. She suspected Ted of infidelity and intercepted a mysterious phone call for Ted in July. The next day she burned some of Ted's letters and drafts and the manuscript of what would have been her second novel, a book about her love for Ted (208).

In 1962 *The Bell Jar* was accepted for publication (211). She could hardly enjoy this with the disintegration of her marriage occurring. According to Sylvia's letters of the time, Ted taunted her about her suicide attempt, suggesting that if she repeated it, life would be simpler for him. She also said Ted called her a hag and said she dragged him down (216). By October, Ted had clearly decided to move out. While Sylvia had contemplated divorce and separation, she did not want this (218).

After their separation, Sylvia moved back to London, rented a flat in Yeats' former home, and continued writing (225-226). She appeared to be doing better. Sylvia was not a teacher, nor was she merely Ted's wife. Sylvia's identity was as a writer now. Because of this, rejections of her work were especially painful at this time (233). *The Bell Jar* was eventually published under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas," and it received favorable reviews (237). During the winter of 1963, Sylvia experienced broad mood swings and saw her psychiatrist frequently (242). On a particular day, February 8, she saw him several times. He and others who knew her were alarmed at her condition because her antidepressants were not working (242).

On the morning of February 11, 1963, she put cups of milk beside her children's beds, put tape around the doors and shoved towels underneath the doors to protect her children from the effects of what she planned to do. She took several sleeping pills and left a note asking that her doctor be called. She turned on the gas on her open oven and knelt next to it. The nurse whom

Sylvia expected to arrive early that morning did not get there until 9:30 A.M., after Sylvia had died (243).

Sylvia Plath constantly struggled with her depression. The high standards and goals that she drove herself to meet, the heartbreak that resulted from the failure of her relationship with Ted Hughes, the time and energy required by the role of motherhood, and the financial fluctuations she experienced were more than she felt she could continue to endure. These conditions were not conducive to writing. Nevertheless, she wrote incredible works while living in these conditions. Although she suffered from depression, Sylvia Plath exhibited considerable strength and did not hide her talents, but shared them with the world.

**"I am not tragically colored. There is not great sorrow damned up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low down dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about. ...No, I do not weep at the world--I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife."**

**--From "How it Feels to be Colored Me" (*World Tomorrow* article)**

Zora Neale Hurston grew up in the rural Florida town of Eatonville. She was born into this all-black town on January 7, in a year around 1901; her biographer Robert Hemenway reports that her birth records did not survive (13). Her father, John Hurston, provided for the family as a mayor of Eatonville and a minister. Her mother, Lucy, was highly intelligent and strong. Her parents emphasized education, and Zora enjoyed learning (15). Lucy Hurston died when Zora was only nine, and the years following her death were hard for Zora (16, 17). Her father remarried soon after Lucy's death, and he sent Zora to school in Jacksonville. Zora did not accept her stepmother, which hurt her relationship with her father, and the passionate Zora later admitted to wanting to kill the woman. She lived periodically with her father and other relatives while she went to school and worked as a maid for white people. She became a wardrobe girl in a Gilbert and Sullivan repertory company that was touring the South, and she felt this experience was educational and liberated her from the provincialism she had always known in rural Florida. She enrolled in high school classes at Morgan Academy in Baltimore in the fall of 1917, at which time she owned only one dress, a change of underwear, and a pair of tan oxfords (17). She did very well at Morgan, where her teachers encouraged her, and after graduation went to Howard University (18).

Here she fell in love with a fellow student, Herbert Sheen, and, even when the two were separated by distance, their love bloomed, and they remained close (18). Zora loved university

life and did well in courses that interested her. By 1920 she had earned an associate degree (18). She worked as a manicurist, waitress, and maid, but she was frequently in debt (19). In the evenings, she went to literary discussions at Halfway House, the home of the black poet Georgia Douglas Johnson (19). She joined a literary club on campus called the Stylus, whose members were chosen in an annual competition, and Zora published her first story in the club's magazine in May 1921 (19). Her writing improved, and the founder of the Stylus recommended her to the editor Charles Johnson (20). He accepted her work, "Drenched in Light," for publication, and after this, Zora submitted two works to the 1925 *Opportunity* contest. Both works won prizes, and Zora was invited to the award dinner in New York. Hemenway points out that Zora was not one to miss an opportunity. At this dinner and others hosted by Johnson, Zora seized the opportunity to make contacts and friendships that would help her career (Hemenway 20).

One of the first of these contacts, Fannie Hurst, was a popular writer who hired Zora first as her live-in secretary and later as a chauffeur and companion (20). Zora received a scholarship to Barnard College, the women's division of Columbia University, which meant she could attend school without financial worries for the first time (21). Here, Zora became fascinated with anthropology and studied African-American folklore (21). She was in New York when the Harlem scene was flourishing, and though she had published little, she was considered an equal among the Harlem artists (24). Zora, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman developed a short-lived magazine entitled *Fire!!*, in which she published "Sweat," and the three formed the core of a group that called themselves the "Niggerati" (43). She moved into an apartment with no furniture or money, but in just a few days these friends in the group completely furnished the place (Hemenway 44). Many parties occurred in her apartment, and as a member of this scene,

she is remembered as a vivid storyteller and frequently the center of attention (61). She felt pulled in opposite directions in this period of her life, wanting to pursue both her college career and her literary interests (63).

According to Hemenway, it was in late February of 1927 when Zora returned to Florida on a \$1400 research fellowship to do field work for six months (84). She was to record the songs, customs, tales, superstitions, and dances of African-American folklore from Jacksonville down to Eatonville and beyond (84).

On May 19, 1927, she married her long time friend Herbert Sheen. In her writings, she professed loving him dearly, but their relationship did not last (94). Zora did not intend to follow her husband in his medical career and felt the marriage disrupted her work (94). They did not divorce until July of 1931, but they had separated less than a year after the marriage (94).

Prospects seemed improved, Hemenway observes, when in September 1927, Zora was invited to visit Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason, a very wealthy patron of the African-American arts (104). She gave Zora approximately fifteen thousand dollars over the next five years in return for collecting more information on African-American folklore (105). The information Zora collected was to be the exclusive property of Mrs. Mason (110). This field study was to be more successful than her last. She learned an incredible amount, and wished to write stories about it, but could not because of Mrs. Mason's ban on publication (113). Throughout these years, Zora maintained a steady correspondence with Langston Hughes, and she sent him some material Mason did not permit her to publish (112).

During her research trip, she traveled many places, including New Orleans (117). Here, she learned much of the secret world of hoodoo and the voodoo queen Marie Leveau; she also



learned various spells (117). She even visited as many conjure doctors as she could find and took on the role of apprentice to experienced sorcerers (118). In this field, she could do what no white researcher could. She could fully immerse herself in the lives of the people she studied. Her experiences in New Orleans left an imprint upon her, and she was sad to leave (123).

After New Orleans, Hemenway states, Zora moved on to South Florida and the Bahamas (127). In the Bahamas, she encountered the prevalence of hoodoo again, and she pursued the study of that and song until she ran out of money and had to return home (127).

Her contract with Mrs. Mason was nearly up at this point, and she had compiled a volume of folk tales that she and Mrs. Mason felt deserved publication (129). It seems, however, that Mrs. Mason did not let Zora end her research and seek publication, and Zora could do little since her volume of folk tales was in one of Mrs. Mason's safe-deposit boxes in New York (130). So, she returned to the Bahamas and New Orleans and further studied conjure (130). Her research continued as did her relationship with the controlling Mrs. Mason until March 31, 1931 (133).

Zora collaborated with Hughes to write the play *Mule Bone*, which has never been produced (136). Their joint effort destroyed their friendship; they avoided each other for the rest of their lives (136).

After ending her years of research, Zora was not quite sure how to use the material best. She had a few essays published in an anthology called *Negro* compiled by a British noble, Nancy Cunard, who dedicated the volume to a black musician with whom she had fallen in love (161). She published a short story, "The Gilded Six-Bits," in early 1933, and then began work on a novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (188). She had no means of support while writing this and had to borrow the two dollars she needed to mail the manuscript (189). Not long after this, her *Mules*

*and Men*, the volume of folk tales that had been in Mrs. Mason's safe-deposit box, was published in February 1935 (163).

Hemenway tells us that Zora went back to school to pursue a Ph.D., but found she could not get the money she needed and simply felt that she preferred writing to taking classes (208, 210). At the time of *Mules and Men*'s publication, she worked as a dramatic coach for the WPA's Federal Theatre Project in New York (218). She received a Guggenheim Fellowship in March of 1936, and she went to Jamaica to collect information and to write (227). She studied the bush doctors and more hoodoo, and then she traveled to Haiti (229, 230). In Haiti, she wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her second novel (231). Most critics consider this book to be her best fiction, and it has become recognized as a minor classic.

Zora requested and received a fellowship renewal to study voodoo in Haiti further (246). However, she became violently ill while studying there, and believed it to be the result of poisoning (248). She planned to finish her work in the United States. Zora reported her voodoo knowledge in her book *Tell My Horse*, which did not sell well (249).

In 1939, she was hired at the North Carolina College for Negroes in Durham, but Hemenway reports that her opinion differences with the administration there prevented her staying long (254). Still, she brought the school national publicity as her novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain* was published her first semester there (256).

Zora remarried again in 1939 to a twenty-three-year-old man she had met in Jacksonville, but she filed for divorce in 1940, claiming he never worked and was abusive (273). In 1941, she moved to California at the urging of a friend and began work on another book (275). She also worked as a story consultant at Paramount Studios and lectured on the black college circuit. Her

autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, was published in late 1942. It was a commercial success and won an award from the *Saturday Review* (Hemenway 276, 288).

In 1943, she moved to Daytona Beach and purchased a houseboat, which provided a residence that Hemenway tells us she loved (296). In 1945, publishers rejected her new book. After that failure, she traveled to Honduras (296). She wrote another novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, about white southerners, and it was accepted for publication in 1948 (307).

In September of 1948, Zora was arrested for committing an immoral act with a ten-year-old boy (317). She firmly denied what Hemenway says was a false charge, and she offered to take a lie-detector test, but no one listened. Her editor Burroughs Mitchell secured her release the same evening, and the next day she moved to the Bronx, leaving no forwarding address and hoping to remain out of the public view. She pleaded not guilty, and on October 15 she was released on \$1500 bond. She was outraged and said she could not have committed sodomy with the child because she was in the Honduras at the time of the alleged incident (320). Further investigation led to a dismissal of the indictment, but the press coverage had done considerable damage to her reputation (321). She fell into a brief depression (322). Understandably, the incident scarred her.

At the invitation of a friend, Zora left New York for Miami (324). She sold a short story to the *Saturday Evening Post* and later worked as a maid in a mansion in Miami. A *Miami Herald* reporter learned that Zora was cleaning the library of her mistress' home when the mistress discovered a story by Zora in the *Saturday Evening Post* she was reading. The story spread quickly, and Zora told the press she had needed a break from writing (325). The truth was that she needed money and was unhappy with what she was writing at the time (326).

In the fifties she did some political journalism writing and felt confidence in a particular piece of fiction she was writing, "The Golden Bench of God." Yet, the years after this were more difficult. Zora was always in need of money and publishers accepted less of her work (Hemenway 338).

She became passionate about a work on Herod that she had written, but publishers rejected it (344). After a stint as a librarian on an air force base, she moved to Merrit Island. Her months at the air force base made her eligible for unemployment wages. Zora could not find work there, so she moved to Fort Pierce, where she wrote for the *Fort Pierce Chronicle* (346). In early 1959, Zora suffered a stroke, and in October she moved to the Saint Lucie Country welfare home (347). Three months later, on January 28, 1960, she died of hypertensive heart disease, and, Hemenway reports, her name was misspelled on her death certificate (348). The minister at the funeral service said, "They said she couldn't become a writer recognized by the world. But she did it. The Miami paper said she died poor. But she died rich. She did something" (348).

**“Once the informal prohibitions have failed to work, what can be done to bury the art, to explain it away, ignore it, downgrade it, in short make it vanish?”**

**Joanna Russ, from *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (17)**

Becoming a writer has been extremely difficult for women. In her book *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers comments, “Women through most of the nineteenth century were barred from the universities, isolated in their own home, chaperoned in travel, painfully restricted in friendship. The personal give-and-take of the literary life was closed to them” (64). Yet women dared to write. Even when they had every reason to give up writing, women wrote. The writer Kate Wilhelm once said,

There were so many pressures to force me into giving up writing again, to become mother, housewife, etc. . . . I realized the world, everyone in it practically, will give more and more responsibility to any woman who will continue to accept it. And when the other responsibilities are too great, her responsibility to herself must go. Or she has to take a thoroughly selfish position and refuse the world, and then accept whatever guilt there is. (Russ 9)

Louisa May Alcott, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sylvia Plath, and Zora Neale Hurston overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to become successful writers. These women never knew each other, and their lives were quite different. However, similarities exist as well as differences. For example, both Plath and Alcott lived in communes at certain points in their lives. The press depicted both Hurston and Gilman negatively; Hurston for an alleged molestation incident, and Gilman for being an unnatural mother. Plath and Gilman struggled with their mental health, both had children for whom to care, and both died at their own hands. Alcott and Hurston spent their childhoods in poverty. Also, all four women supported

themselves by working other jobs to survive when their writing income was insufficient. All these shared experiences meant that they had less time and energy to spend writing, but they continued to write with what little they had left. This has been the fate of countless female writers.

Certainly all writers face struggles, whatever their gender. However, women writers face special circumstances. In their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar remark, “Unlike her male counterpart, then, the female artist must first struggle against the effects of a socialization which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, futile, or even . . . self-annihilating” (49).

Women writers faced obstacles such as poverty, mental illness, discrimination, motherhood, and social disapproval. Abandoning their art would have been the easier path to take, but they wrote despite the towering difficulties. They wrote when they had children to watch, husbands to please, jobs to perform, and other responsibilities to which they must attend. They wrote when they lacked money, energy, time, and even respect. They wrote and wrote tremendously well. Why were these obstacles unsuccessful deterrents to the literary careers of women like Alcott, Gilman, Plath, and Hurston? No one can know for sure. Perhaps they could not contain their passion for writing. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “All women live by truth and stand in need of expression” (Moers 3). Note his usage of the word “need.” These women had every reason not to write, but they wrote as if writing were as necessary for life as breathing. They hurdled every obstacle and wrote extraordinary works. Their works are extraordinary not only because they are great pieces of literature, but also because the women were extraordinary. Nothing could stop them from writing.

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